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Carretera San Vicente del Raspeig s/n 03690 San Vicente del Raspeig. Alicante (SPAIN)

[eurau@ua.es](mailto:eurau@ua.es)

# The diffused botanical garden begins in the parking lots

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A new future for Valco San Paolo in Rome

**Rabazo Martín, Marta<sup>1</sup>**

1. Università Degli Studi Roma Tre, Dipartimento di Architettura, Rome, Italy, marta.rabazomartin@uniroma3.it and Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura, Madrid, Spain, m.rabazo@alumnos.upm.es

## Synopsis

This paper aims to present the diffused botanical garden as a new typology of urban space and a methodology to colonize lost spaces in the area of Ostiense - Valco San Paolo in Rome, a highly disperse area due to the deindustrialization. The intermediate scale of landscape keeps together all the puzzle pieces, interconnecting physical scales, time and users in an accurate acupuncture exercise. The diffused character of the different systems in the area needs to be held by an active and vibrant project of ground.

The parking lots are active areas, versatile and adaptable that highly contribute to the urban ecology, activating an alternative network, base of a new system of open spaces linked to the main green infrastructures operating in this area.

**Key words:** Diffused botanical garden, intermediate scale of landscape, parking lots, ground level project, urban project.



The **Ostiense-Valco San Paolo** area of Rome is located to the southwest of the city, confined with the city walls in its access by Porta San Paolo and developed between two railway lines. Strategically located in the expansion of the city towards the port of Ostia, it has always been the subject of numerous plans and projects where its main role was to connect the city with the sea. It is the first industrial district of the city of Rome due not only to the two railway lines but also to the navigability of the Tevere to the port of Trastevere a little further north. But despite being an industrial area, Rome never had large concentrations of industry so for this reason it is located in close proximity to the residential urban fabric.

It also contains the Tevere river as axis, which right in this section abandons the protection that accompanied it from the sea under the tutelage of *the Riserva del Litorale* Romano and still does not take the title of the Tevere in the historic center. The attempt of the city to grow towards the sea, mainly through the via Cristoforo Colombo, and the lack of tutelage make this whole sector to be developed on the great communication routes, as a result the city has turned its back on the river, leaving all the vicinity space as a forgotten area that functions as a background to the great axes that cross it

In addition, the disintegrated fabric that tries to coexist between the large structures and the residential areas has been colonized by a series of parking lots (official and spontaneous), often in strategic locations (on the banks of the Tevere, along the via Ostiense) that implement asphalted surfaces that are difficult to blend with their surroundings (Fig.1).

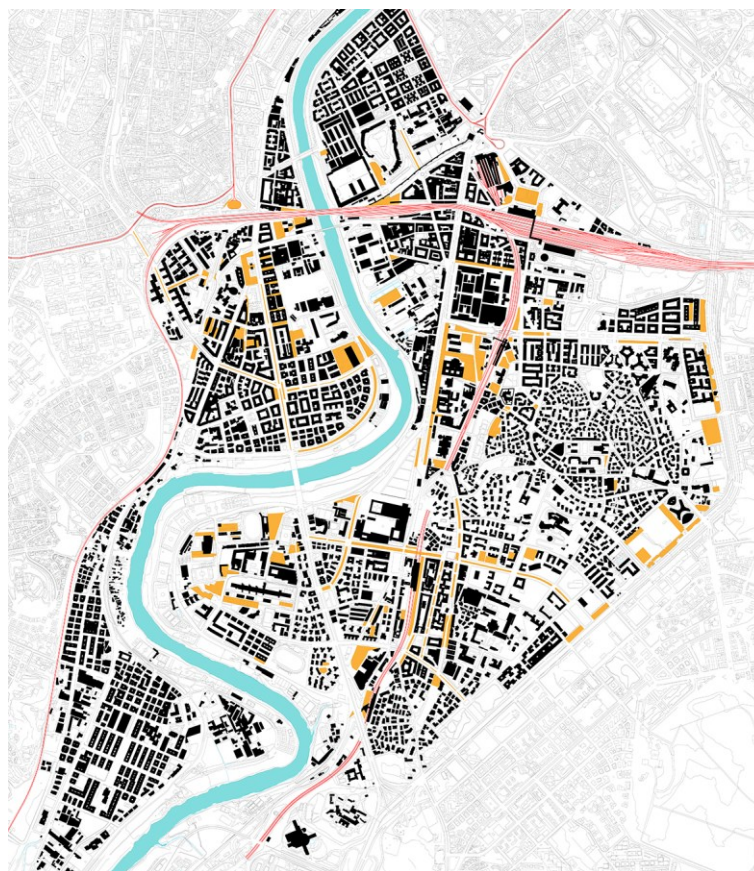


Figure 1.

The diffused botanical garden begins in the parking lots  
Rabazo Martín, Marta

In the mid '90 an **urban project**<sup>1</sup> was developed aiming to restructure the whole sector. The Roma Tre university was a main actor as establishing most of its faculties and schools (a cultural infrastructure) in Valco San Paolo and Via Ostiense, the mobility infrastructures needed an implementation to reconnect the area with its surroundings, the presence of large industrial areas (Italgas with its gasometers, the Monte Martini thermoelectric power station, the general markets that supplied the city, ...) were creating large closed blocks that should be opened to public space, and this rethought as a totally new system articulating all the interventions; last but not least, the Tevere was imagined as a new green corridor for citizens. Very little of that was done but the ideas are still latent.

In 2014, the Architecture Department of Roma Tre conducted a research of introducing a new typology of public space: the **diffused botanical garden** would link all the open spaces of the faculties to the already existing system of urban space and "lost" spaces<sup>2</sup>; it was a perfect case to understand how a developing sector faces the interstices created in its planning process together with its existing anomalous spaces, bending traces, fluxes and users, attempting to give continuity to the "project of ground"<sup>3</sup> through an **intermediate scale** that connects the different public areas that have been generated. The classical botanical garden is here revisited and adapted to the diffused character of the area. It is not an exclusive well-defined enclosure where just study the vegetation anymore, but a new urban space where to enjoy the vegetation with a didactical character; it is the vegetation meeting the city, the vegetation as main actor of the public space, a methodology knitting together all the puzzle pieces, in a scale that does not care about extensions but links to the territory and its surroundings, whether they are temporal, spatial, environmental or social. Vegetation and landscape are not a superficial practice to mitigate or embellish these anti spaces, but a tool which allows us to understand how to work with and from the contradictions of contemporary territories, assimilating all technical and engineering components and cityscape's figures<sup>4</sup>.

Diffused industrial area, diffused university, diffused cultural services are linked through vegetation and urban ecology to the territorial systems crossing the area in a delicate exercise of urban acupuncture

Starting in the university's **parking lots**<sup>5</sup>, the new system will rapidly extend to other parking lots and will carefully colonize the nearby lost and forgotten spaces (Fig.2). The parking lots, open space typology intimately related to modern disperse cities, are highly versatile spaces due to its spatial characteristics and its (so far) simple morphology as a paved extension aiming to have the maximum space to park cars. Because these are governed by clearly defined schedules

<sup>1</sup> For further research refer to Canciani, Marco. *Piano di assetto per l'attuazione del progetto urbano Ostiense-Marconi*, Edizioni Kappa, 2004 or Marroni, Umberto. *Roma. La rigenerazione dei quartieri industriali. Il progetto urbano Ostiense-Marconi*, Ponte Sisto, 2017

<sup>2</sup> It mainly refers to Roger Trancik's concept of lost space in Trancik, Roger. *Finding Lost Space*. Van Nostrand, 1986

<sup>3</sup> It refers to Bernardo Secchi's concept of ground project in Secchi, Bernardo. *Un progetto per l'urbanistica*. Piccola biblioteca Einaudi, 1989

<sup>4</sup> In Ghio, Metta, Montuori. *La scala intermedia per il progetto del paesaggio italiano*, Convegno Nazionale Paesaggio 150, Reggio Calabria 2011

<sup>5</sup> For further research refer to Ben-Joseph, Eran. *Rethinking a lot. The design and culture of parking*. The Mitt press, 2012 or Childs, Mark. *Parking Spaces. A design, implementation and use manual for architects, planners and engineers*. McGraw-Hill, 1999

(working hours for residential and office use, weekdays for business, etc.) an alternative look at their use, is almost an immediate parameter to be dealt with.

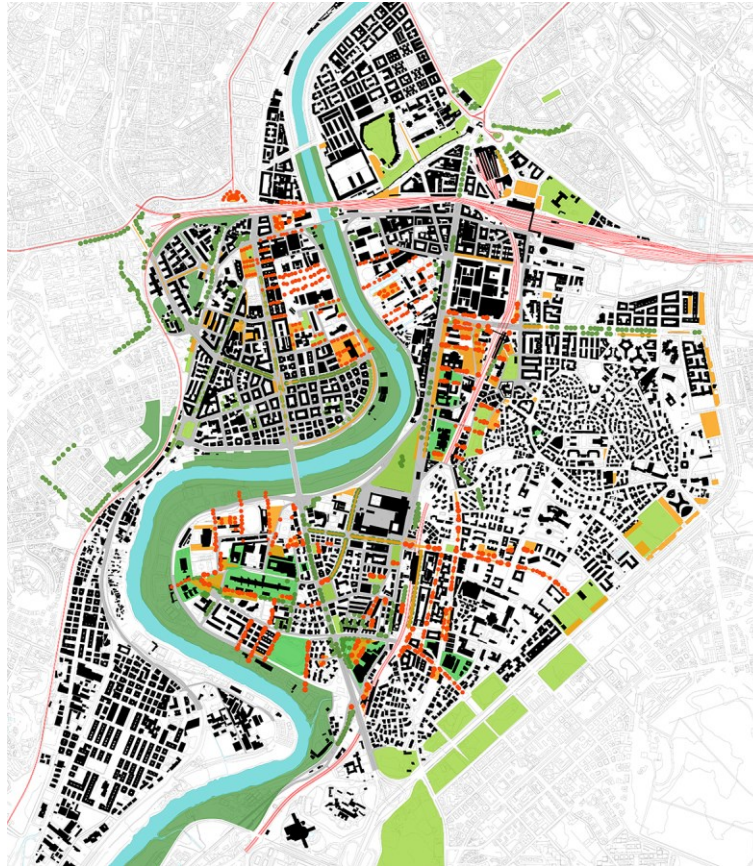


Figure 2.

But not only, they are also flexible and multifunctional spaces, even for spontaneous appropriations, spaces that can act as relievers of the increasing presence of cars in our cities and positively contribute to the urban identity. They have a huge importance within an ecological and sustainable framework where the proper use of its materials can help reduce impervious surfaces, fight heat islands, and contribute to the control of water runoff and effective groundwater recharge. These forgotten spaces deserve not only our economic investment but our attention as designers of our urban environment.

We need to abandon the static and already defined traditional open space and look for vibrant programs that can satisfy a large number of users. The spatial characteristic of a parking lot offers a unique opportunity to use them beyond mere car storage. Markets, game and sport areas, cultural and social event gatherings, contemporary gardens... all these activities can occasionally come together in the parking lot as part of the public realm. The parking areas both with its desired or undesired uses, forms the unplanned space within the urban fabric that fills the physical and mental gaps in our projected environment. Parking lots don't need to be overdesigned but we definitively need to look at them again. Their standardized character needs to be overcome by their innate ability to generate identity and its potential power to transform a space into a place.

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## Biography

**Marta Rabazo.** PhD candidate at the ETSAM, DPA, UPM, in Madrid (Spain) and also coordinates the Master on Landscape architecture-OPEN at the Roma Tre University (Italy). Trained as an architect in Madrid, Spain, with a Master of Architecture from the Politecnical University of Madrid and a Postgraduate certificate in Design of Parks and Public Spaces from Roma Tre University of Rome, she has been working in architecture and landscape for the last twelve years for various renowned firms.

In 2008, she joined Balmori Associates where she has been involved in various projects including Campa de los Ingleses and Plaza Eusakdi in Bilbao; the Botanical Research Institute of Texas; Yale Engineering Research Building and Farmington Canal Greenway in New Haven; VIOL Headquarters in São Paulo and several competitions.

Her interest in the intersection of landscape with infrastructure or architecture, sustainability and representation of landscape, guided her lectures and researches.